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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Hate campaigns and violence against people with no religion by state and non-state actors

Just as freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief protects the right of the individual to follow a religion; it also protects the right to reject any religion or belief, to identify as humanist or atheist, and to manifest non-religious convictions through expression, teaching and practice.

As CCPR General Comment No. 22 notes: "The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in article 18.1 [...] encompasses freedom of thought on all matters [...]Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms 'belief' and 'religion' are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions"[1]. Thus, it is not necessary to describe atheism as a religion, or as analogous to religion, to guarantee atheists (those who do not believe in any god) and humanists (those who embrace a morality centred on human welfare and human flourishing that does not appeal to any supernatural source) the same protection as religious believers. On the contrary, atheism and theism are protected equally as manifestations of the fundamental right to freedom of thought and conscience.

Despite this, the overwhelming majority of countries fail to respect the rights of the non-religious. In many countries there is discrimination against the non-religious. This has been detailed in previous written statements and in the IHEU's *Freedom of Thought Reports*[2]. In addition to this widespread discrimination, in some countries there also exists outright persecution and 'hate campaigns' directed at non-believers as a distinct minority group. This has come both from state and non-state actors.

Vigilante violence against people with no religion

Over the past few years, the IHEU has documented many cases in which those who either self-identify as non-religious or who are accused of non-belief, have been violently targeted by individual actors and vigilante groups.

The existence of this form of violence reflects societal and cultural prejudicial attitudes against those who happen to have no religious belief or are critical of religion. Such violence is sometimes used in situations where there are personal grudges to be settled (as in Pakistan[3], for example) or political ends to be achieved (as in Mauritania[4], for example). Its existence also reflects levels of ignorance and fear about non-belief, as well as political and societal exploitation and manipulation of that ignorance and fear.

Some recent examples of vigilante violence against the non-religious include:

- In August 2014, a member of the Ugandan Humanist Association for Leadership Equality and Accountability Group member Joseph Lukyamuzi was attacked, and on 30 October 2014 the director of HALEA, Kato Mukasa, suffered an arson attack on his home, all apparently in connection with the rising profile and human rights work of this Humanist organization.

- In June 2014 in Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was assessed as needing psychiatric help because of his atheist views and held against his will at a psychiatric ward. His father, formerly a senior member of the Islamic religious authorities, had orchestrated Mubarak's detention, after Mubarak had refused to keep quiet about his atheistic views on religion. Bala was freed after nearly three weeks, due to a strike at the hospital.

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[1] http://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html

[2] See: A/HRC/22/NGO/24; A/HRC/25/NGO/64; and *Freedom of Thought Reports* 2012 – 2014 (http://freethoughtreport.com/)

[3] See "Pakistan" entry in *ibid.*

[4] See "Mauritania" entry in *ibid.*

- In Bangladesh in February 2013, an atheist blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haide, was murdered at home. He was associated with secularist views in line with Shahbag and his head was hacked open with a machete the day after he took part in the Shahbag rally[5]. The month before Ahmed Rajib Haide was killed Islamist militants had attempted to murder another atheist blogger, Asif Mohiuddin. Mohiuddin survived that attack, thanks to emergency surgery. An estimated 100,000 Islamists in early 2013 took to the streets of Dhaka calling for "death to the atheist bloggers".

In some states there exists a culture of impunity, where perpetrators know they will not be pursued or brought to justice for the crimes they commit against non-believers. Indeed, this phenomenon has been observed by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in his recent report on violence committed in the name of religion. He notes that atheists and agnostics suffer in many countries from a climate of intimidation, repression or violence[6] and that in some countries, "certain State agencies [...] support such violence directly or indirectly" by, for example, "promoting hatred" or by "turning a blind eye to violence"[7].

The significance of highlighting mob violence then, is not solely to delineate the climate of fear and violence in which some people associated with non-belief are forced to live, but to point to governmental responsibility in creating, maintaining and sometimes even sponsoring civil violence against non-believers.

State-based hate campaigns against people with no religion

Notably, 'hate campaigns' and incitement to violence against those with no religion does not come exclusively from individuals in society or reactionary or radical religious leaders, but increasingly from political leaders themselves, including heads of state. 2014 has seen a surge in the phenomenon of state officials and political leaders agitating specifically against non-religious people, in terms that would normally be associated with social persecution against ethnic or religious minorities. Some cases of 2014 include:

- In January, Saudi Arabia enacted a new law equating "atheism" with "terrorism". Though the law sought to criminalise numerous things, its very first article banned "Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion"[8].

- In May, the Malaysian Prime, Minister Najib Razak, labelled "humanism and secularism as well as liberalism" as "deviant" and a threat to Islam and the Malaysian state itself. This was in the context of a speech in which he also denied that Malaysians had any right to "apostasy"[9].

- In June, Egyptian authorities carried out an organized backlash against young atheists[10]. Nuamat Sati of the Ministry of Youth announced a campaign to spread awareness of "the dangers of atheism" and why it is "a threat to society". In 2014, Egyptian authorities detained young atheists who appeared on TV media and Youtube talking about their right to express atheist views. In November, Christian churches "joined forces" with Egypt's Al-Azhar in another anti-atheism campaign, saying that "society should resist this phenomenon [of atheism]"[11].

As the Special Rapporteur notes, states have a responsibility to protect their populations and ensure the realization of

[5] http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/16/killers-hacked-rajib-first-then-slit-his-throat-police
[6] A/HRC/28/66, §9
[7] A/HRC/28/66, §5
[8] *Freedom of Thought Report 2014*, pp.377-378
[9] www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/pm-says-human-rightism-humanism-secularismnew-religion-threatening-islam
[10] http://www.madamasr.com/news/govt-announces-campaign-save-youth-atheism and al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/egypt-government-fears-atheism.html
[11] www.worldbulletin.net/africa/148163/egypts-muslim-christian-authorities-unite-againstatheism

their rights. They also have an "obligation to act swiftly to stop acts of violence committed in the name of religion"[12]. It is extraordinary therefore, that not only are these states failing their irreligious population by not protecting them, but actually being complicit in creating a climate in which acts of violence against them happen.

Summary and Recommendations

Whether targeted as "apostates" or "infidels" or – more directly – as atheists or humanists, or indeed the far broader "liberals", it is human beings being targeted, restricted and denied their basic rights here. But the simmering trend toward targeting "atheists", as such, risks broadening existing prohibitions and agitation.

Of course non-believers as a minority are far from alone in suffering persecution and violence from state and non-state actors. There are countless examples of other groups suffering horrifically in the same way; for example, Ahmadis in Pakistan[13], Christians in much of the Middle East[14], Shi'as in Malaysia[15] or Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar[16]. The focus here on violence against non-believers specifically by no means seeks to imply a hierarchy of importance in terms of the groups persecuted. We instead raise the issue here because others have not. Non-believers are a group often forgotten by those concerned with (ir)religious freedom; a group too often wrongly ascribed characteristics of amoralism and bereft of human rights.

Accordingly, we recommend:

- As highlighted in our last written statement on this issue [17], the language of international resolutions and domestic legislation is important. *Explicit* mention of non-believers when highlighting violence against belief-based minorities is vital for ensuring an increasing global awareness about the plight of so many and indeed their existence as a minority in so many countries who deserve equal protection. We are grateful to the Special Rapporteur for having done so in his latest report[18].

- There needs to be convincing international condemnation and response to those country leaders who use 'hate speech' or incitement against any religious of belief minority, it needs to be clear that this includes those with no religion.

- Council members should take concrete action to implement the Rabat Plan of Action, which seeks to prevent incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence whilst protecting free speech.

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[12] A/HRC/28/66, §89 & §90
[13] http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/18/indonesia-risks-taking-pakistans-path-intolerance
[14] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/christian-persecution/
[15] http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304173704579259473076713800
[16] http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/burma-end-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims
[17] A/HRC/25/NGO/64
[18] A/HRC/28/66, §9